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ABSTRACT

If a civilization as powerful and technologically advanced during its time as the Maya could disappear, can the same tragic outcome befall the United States? In this lesson, students work in teams to research the ancient Mayan civilization, specifically the circumstances of its demise. Student teams prepare a report of their findings and recommend ways the United States can avoid a similar fall. Students are provided with background information, detailed instructions, on-line resources, and reflection questions. The teacher's notes describe the unit's purpose. (BT)

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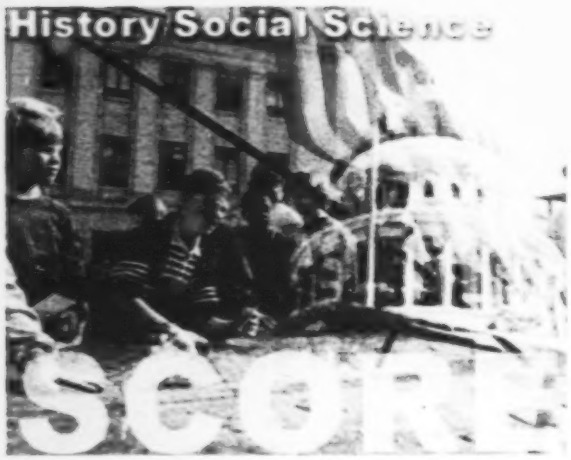

Schools of California Online Resources for Education (SCORE): Connecting California's Classrooms to the World

Will America Fall Apart Like the Maya?

7th Grade Lesson by David McDonald

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http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/activity/mayans/

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It is late at night, and you are speaking to President Clinton on the telephone. He has expressed to you his concerns about the stability of the United States government as the year 2000 draws near, and now requests your assistance on some important issues.

An avid student of history, the President is pondering the question of why so many once-powerful civilizations around the world have vanished. His attention was drawn to this question by the fact that, as the year 2000 and the new millenium approach, doom and gloom predictions regarding the future of America appear in the media more and more frequently. Most of these predictions are overly sensationalistic and need not be taken seriously. However, one very real trend in today's world - the move toward "globalization" - has created a feeling of uncertainty for many Americans. The notion of a global culture is unfamiliar to many Americans, and globalization will surely change the world's political landscape in ways that promise to raise new challenges for Americans. Can we maintain our stature in world politics and protect our way of life amid all the changes that globalization will bring?

President Clinton is very aware of these concerns, and wants to do everything possible to make sure we don't repeat mistakes which led to the demise of earlier civilizations. He is particularly anxious to learn more about the remarkable civilization of ancient Maya that was based in southern Mexico and parts of Central America. Because of its geographic proximity to the United States, the President believes Mayan history might yield some insights that will prove relevant to our current situation here in America.

His main question reflects his most pressing fear. If a civilization as powerful and technologically advanced during its time as the Maya could disappear, can the same tragic outcome befall the United States? The President asks that you put together a group of outstanding archaeologists and scholars so that the necessary research into this issue can begin. After

considering his request, you agree to take on this important task.

The President thanks you for your help, and a few days later, your instructions arrive in the following letter:

Dear Members of the Maya Research Task Force,

As you know, I am intrigued by the fall of the ancient Mayan civilization. It concerns me to know that a once-mighty and technologically advanced culture thrived so close to our borders, and yet today lies in ruins. Your team's task is simple. You must provide answers to some basic questions so that America will not be doomed to repeat the tragic fate of the Maya.

1. Who were the Maya, and where did they live? Did they reside in large cities, medium-sized towns, or small rural villages?

2. What was life like in the average Mayan town? Was it different than our lifestyles here in America?

3. Describe the Mayan religious beliefs. To what extent did their daily lives revolve around religion? Could their belief system have contributed in some way to their demise?

4. What are some technological advances that the Mayans have been credited with introducing?

5. Oftentimes we can tell a great deal about the beliefs of a society by examining their "creation myths" - their stories and fables about how the universe, the world, and mankind were created. What were the Mayan creation myths. Were they similar to our own, or to those of any other societies we know about?

6. What is known about the Mayan calendar? How is their calendar different from ours?

7. In what type of physical environment did the Maya live? A prosperous civilization like the Maya must have learned to control their physical environment to a large extent. In what ways did they accomplish this? Based on what your team has discovered, do you think environmental factors contributed in any way to their demise?

8. Mayans had a great interest in astronomy. How did astronomy influence their lives? Did their belief in astronomy contribute in any way to their fall as a civilization?

9. This last question is the most important of all. Based on what your team has learned, please tell me why you think the great Mayan civilization fell to ruins, and also what steps Americans can take today so that we do not suffer the same fate?

As you begin researching these questions, keep in mind that the issues outlined above are of national importance for Americans. Clearly, the world will continue to change profoundly in the near future. No person or country can prevent these changes. For this reason, America now stands at a crossroads. We cannot simply assume that our previous accomplishments will guarantee our continued prosperity. Rather, we must find policies that will allow us to move into this uncertain future with the strength to meet those challenges that worldwide changes will surely bring. By studying the successes and failures of past civilizations such as the Maya, we can better assure ourselves that the policies we choose will prove effective.

Sincerely,

President Bill Clinton

The Task

Your team is assigned the task of researching ancient Mayan civilization in order to uncover the reasons why such a powerful and prosperous society ultimately fell to ruins. Your research should address the questions raised in the above letter from the President. Once your research is completed, your team must submit a report to the President in which you explain your findings. Include in your report some recommended policies the President can adopt in order to preserve modern-day American civilization.

The Process

Try to stay within this framework:

A. Divide the research questions among your team members. Every member is expected to complete his or her job.

B. With your group, brainstorm reasons why a given society might fail.

C. When each team member has completed his or her assigned work, share your findings with each other. Together, you can decide which points among those

raised by each team member should be included in your presentation to the President. Try to choose those points which will best enable the President to compare the circumstances of the Mayan decline with the situation we Americans are confronted with today.

D. Lastly, organize your presentation to the President. It might help to include some visual aids, so be prepared to create posters and drawings that will help illustrate your findings to the President. Not everyone feels comfortable speaking in front of a group, so as work begins you might want to assign tasks that each team member will feel comfortable carrying out.

Resources

World Wide Web Sites

Lords of the Earth: Maya, Aztec and Inca Center
http://www.realtime.net/maya/index.html

Welcome to Maya Adventure
http://www.sci.mus.mn.us/sln/ma/

Maya Mathematics
http://www.astro.uva.nl/michielb/maya/math.html

Maya Quest 97
http://www.mecc.com/maya97/archives/archives.html

Mayan Folktales
http://www.folkart.com/~latitude/folktale/folktale.htm

The Maya Environment
http://www.astro.uva.nl/michielb/maya/geographical.html

Other Resources:

Encyclopedia (either hardback or CD-Rom 1995 or newer)
Newspapers or magazines relevant to the topic
MayaQuest CD-Rom

Learning Advice

While addressing the President's questions, remember that your main purpose is to find policy solutions to the challenge he presently faces as our country's leader. Each question is intended to provide historical insight into the pressing issues we face in America as we attempt to secure our position in the rapidly shifting global environment. As you find answers to these questions, compare the circumstances faced by the Mayan people to those that confront us today. What are the similarities, and what are the differences? Share ideas on these issues with your team members as you build your case. Finally, while preparing your presentation, remember that your audience is the President of the United States. He will be expecting high-quality work from each of you.

Evaluation

Your and your team will be evaluated on the thoroughness of your research, the quality of your policy solutions, and the organization of your presentation to the President.

Conclusion

This activity is designed to raise important questions regarding the relevance of historical events to modern-day circumstances that impact our lives on a daily basis. Let us consider some of those questions here. In light of what we have learned about Mayan civilization and its ultimate downfall, do you believe that individuals and governments tend to repeat the mistakes of previous generations, or do we manage to learn from their mistakes as we establish and maintain our own systems of government? How can the idea of learning from past mistakes be applied to your own personal life? To your local community? To your country?

Reflection

Spend a moment considering the work you have just completed. Then pick one of the following questions and write a response to it as part of your evaluation.

1. If you actually had to perform this task for the President of the United States, would you have done anything differently?

2. Based on what you have learned, do you feel that American citizens have cause for concern as the year 2000 approaches.

Teacher Notes

Grade Level: Seven
Unit: The Maya/Early Mesoamerican history.
Lesson Purpose: While studying the life of the Mayans, students can apply what they learn to
present-day circumstances. Through this process, students will begin to develop a global perspective.

With the class you should develop a rubric to help shape the lesson and guide students through the process. The rubric should give you and your students a framework to stay focused on the task and to periodically assess their progress.

Last revised Dec 12/28/99